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RESEARCH SUMMARY

The International Political Costs of National Missile Defense

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National missile defense (NMD) is the most visible and controversial element of President George W. Bush's defense policy. The Bush administration has focused its case for NMD on the danger posed by so-called "rogue states," such as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq that are thought to be working to acquire long-range missile capabilities. Although less frequently stated, some proponents of NMD believe the United States should deploy defenses against China and possibly Russia. University of Chicago Harris School Professor Charles Glaser opposes the Bush administration's NMD policy. In a forthcoming article in the journal *International Security* (Summer 2001), "National Missile Defense and the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," Glaser and co-author Steve Fetter (University of Maryland) argue that the United States needs to significantly reorient its NMD policy, at a minimum adopting a variety of more cooperative military policies, and possibly foregoing NMD entirely.

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Glaser, a political scientist, and Fetter, a physicist, conclude that NMD would increase U.S. security only if the United States could deploy an effective system without seriously damaging its relations with Russia and China. Although an effective defense would be of some value against emerging rogue missile threats, the researchers believe that the security benefits are exaggerated. Rogue intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs) have yet to materialize, may be delayed or eliminated by diplomacy, and can almost certainly be deterred if they arise. In comparison, the potential international political costs of NMD are large. NMD that increases Russian and Chinese insecurity risks triggering reactions—including arms buildups and more aggressive foreign policies—that will on balance reduce U.S. security.

NMD systems are designed to protect the United States from ICBMs carrying weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological, and possibly chemical weapons. The United States is prohibited by the 1972 Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty—which was originally negotiated with the Soviet Union and now applies to Russia—from deploying NMD that would protect the U.S. homeland. Although concerned about the danger posed by rogue states, the Clinton administration was reluctant to discard the ABM Treaty, believing that it continued to play an important role in helping to manage U.S. relations with Russia. In sharp contrast, the Bush administration appears interested in breaking out of the constraints imposed by the ABM Treaty.

Bush Administration Strategy

In his May 2001 speech on missile defense, President Bush stated his determination to "leave behind the constraints of the ABM Treaty" and to deploy NMD as soon as possible. The Bush administration has not yet decided what technologies should compose the U.S. NMD system, but it appears inclined toward a layered system that would combine boost-phase and multiple midcourse systems to produce a large and robust NMD. Boost-phase systems are designed to intercept ballistic missiles during the powered phase of their

trajectory, which occurs during the first few minutes after an ICBM is launched; midcourse systems are designed to intercept warheads after they separate from the booster rocket and before they reenter the atmosphere.

Glaser and Fetter find the case for NMD far from compelling, but do not completely reject a role for a limited NMD. If the United States proceeds with NMD, it should deploy only a surface-based (land- or sea-based) boost-phase NMD system. Because surface-based boost-phase interceptors must be located within several hundred kilometers of potential launch sites, this type of NMD would be unable to reach missiles launched from deep inside Russia or China and therefore should pose little threat to their security. A boost-phase system also could be far more effective than the midcourse system that was planned by the Clinton administration, because a boost-phase system would intercept ICBMs before decoys and other countermeasures could be released. Technical experts have concluded that a state that is capable of deploying an ICBM will also be capable of deploying countermeasures that will be able to defeat the planned mid-course NMD. Although Moscow and Beijing are likely to see dangers even in surface-based boost-phase systems, since their deployment would require amending the ABM Treaty and would generate momentum for layered NMD systems, a single layer boost-phase system has the best hope of minimizing the international political costs of NMD.

Addressing Russian and Chinese Concerns

In contrast, the researchers argue that there is a powerful case against proceeding with deployment of midcourse systems and layered systems that combine midcourse and boost-phase systems. Unfortunately, the Bush administration appears headed in this direction. If the United States decides to deploy NMD against China and Russia, which some proponents favor, then there is little America can do to moderate the international political costs. If, however, the United States proceeds with midcourse NMD to protect against rogue states, there are a variety of approaches for significantly reducing NMD's international political costs.

One possibility is an arms control agreement in which the United States eliminates an offensive nuclear warhead for each defensive interceptor it deploys. If, for example, Russia deploys 2000 strategic offensive warheads, the United States could deploy 1800 warheads and 200 NMD interceptors. This type of agreement is likely to have greater symbolic and political value than strategic value, but such considerations might be key. More important would be U.S. efforts to reduce the threat that its strategic nuclear forces pose to Russian nuclear forces. Russian forces are highly vulnerable to a massive U.S. nuclear attack and Russia fears that the addition of U.S. NMD could undermine its nuclear deterrent. Russia worries that the United States could attack first and destroy most of its nuclear force, and negate the strategic value of any surviving Russian nuclear weapons with its NMD. The United States can limit the threat posed to Russia by greatly reducing the size and readiness of its offensive nuclear forces and by committing itself to building only a small NMD system.

Glaser and Fetter argue that policies for reassuring China are harder to design because China currently has a very small nuclear force, which it is preparing to modernize. U.S. NMD will almost certainly compel China to deploy a larger modernized force. The United States must recognize that its NMD will have this effect and prepare now not to misinterpret the Chinese nuclear buildup. The danger is that the United States will interpret Chinese reactions as aggressive and that China will in turn conclude that the United States is more aggressive, since Beijing will view its own buildup as purely defensive. A classic spiral of hostility would be set in motion, which could fuel other potentially competitive and conflictual elements of the emerging U.S.-China relationship, including concerns about the growth of Chinese power and divergent beliefs about Taiwan's future.

To avoid this downward political spiral, the Bush administration must explain to the American public and to Chinese leaders that the United States understands that its NMD is likely to convince China to build a larger nuclear force. While not encouraging this reaction, U.S. leaders need to declare that they will accept this nuclear buildup as consistent with China's security requirements and therefore will not interpret it as an indication that China's regional or global ambitions are growing. If clearly stated and widely accepted across the American political spectrum, this understanding should help China appreciate that the United States is not turning to NMD to gain military advantages or to fuel competitive political relations. Working now to establish a domestic consensus on how China is likely to view U.S. NMD will reduce the likelihood of misreading China's military response and, in turn, of escalating tensions. The researchers note, however, that given the current strains in U.S.-China relations, even dedicated efforts to manage the action-reaction generated by U.S. NMD will likely be insufficient to prevent misperceptions.

In conclusion, although Glaser and Fetter believe that the United States should forego midcourse NMD entirely, they conclude that limited NMD might increase U.S. security if the U.S. energetically pursues cooperative policies. However, the researchers find that if the United States moves forward on NMD while failing to pursue such policies (a possibility that seems likely), NMD will certainly reduce U.S. security.

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